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Special Report

Libya: Qadhafi, Religious Revolutionary

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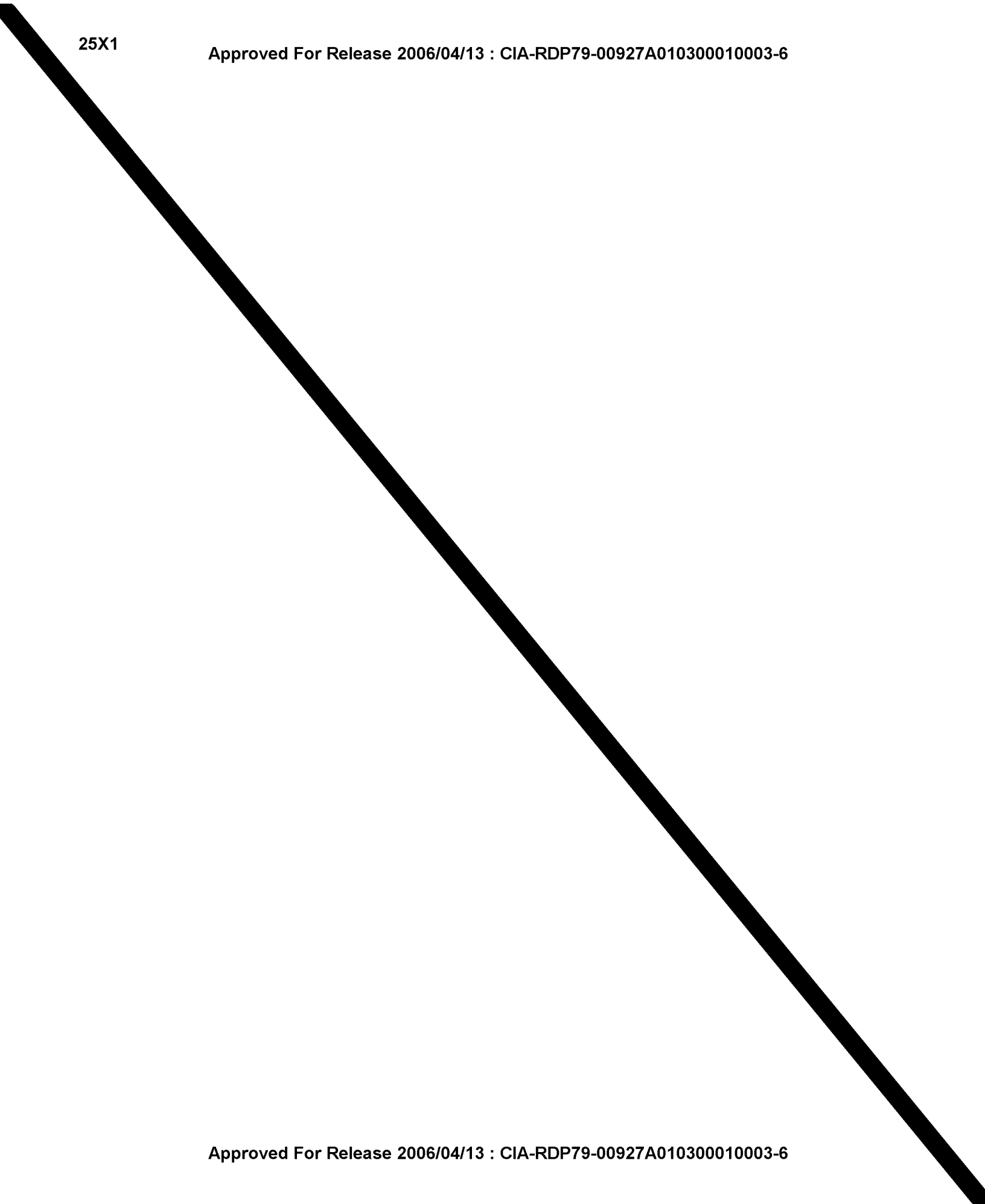

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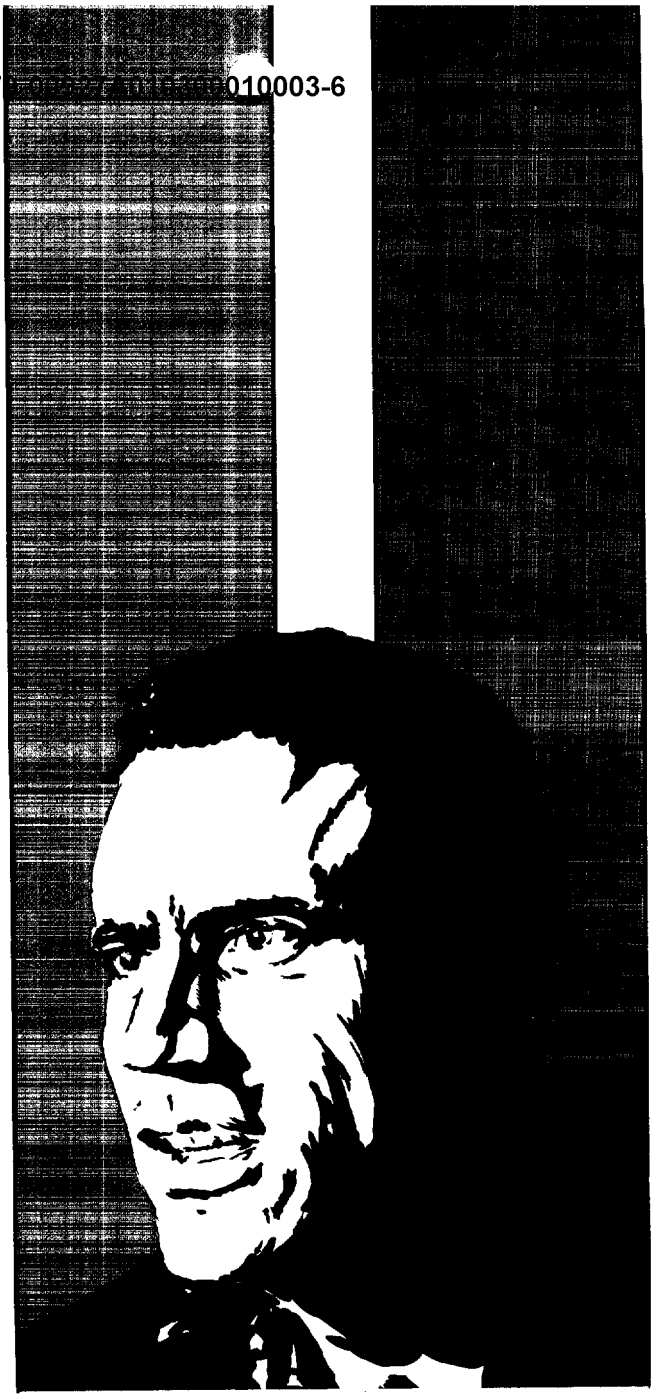

Qadhafi

Religious Revolutionary

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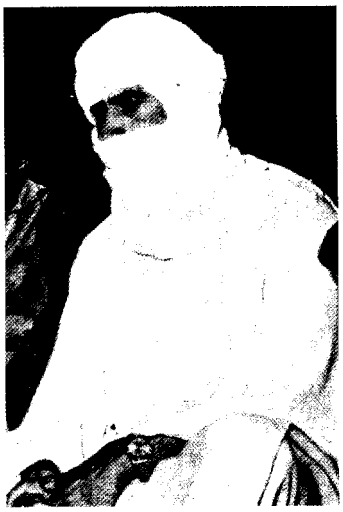

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Summary

As he enters his fourth year in power, President Muammar Qadhafi—an Arab leader who stands virtually alone in advocating a specifically Islamic Arab revolution—is showing signs of becoming more extreme in both his foreign and domestic policies. Backed by his country's vast oil wealth, Qadhafi has become an ever more active player in Middle East politics. He is uncompromising in his attitude toward Israel. He is contemptuous of other Arab leaders whom he suspects of planning to negotiate with Israel. Wishing to damage Israeli interests where and whenever possible, Qadhafi has broadened his support for the fedayeen, launched an anti-Israeli campaign throughout the world, and is seeking ways to challenge Tel Aviv's supporters, especially the US.

At home, the 31-year-old leader is still the undisputed head of the ruling Revolutionary Command Council and the key force binding it together. From this vantage point, Qadhafi has pushed ahead with his plans for union with Egypt despite practical barriers, popular opposition, and growing controversy within the government itself. He is threatening to get tough with his critics even at the expense of ultimately jeopardizing the cohesion of his regime.

Qadhafi's drive toward Arab unity and by extension his attitude toward Israel are born out of a complex mix of religious conviction and a sense of personal mission. These are not likely to change. While he does on occasion temper his actions to the dictates of the real world—e.g., his disinclination to cut off Libya's oil—most of his

25X1 actions now focus on hastening the liquidation of Israel.

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A Real Crusade

Qadhafi's unshakable belief in Islam guides almost all of his actions. He is genuinely committed to the idea that Islamic principles should explain and organize all aspects of society. More important, he believes that it is his duty to restore the Islamic religion to its rightful place in society and to unite the Arab people. For him, the existence of Israel and almost every setback to the Arab cause are attributable to human frailty, especially a default of faith and a departure from moral principles. This view is expressed in his inflexibility, xenophobia, impatience, and frequent periods of frustration and disillusionment.

Qadhafi's Islamic crusade has strong political ramifications. In his eyes, the proposed union with Egypt is a first critical step in the "battle" to restore Palestine and achieve an Arab solution to Middle East questions. Moreover, Qadhafi apparently is convinced that once the union becomes reality, Libya will have greater leverage to oust conservative Arab rulers and to combat great powers which he sees as the avowed enemies of Arab solidarity. The Libyan leader may believe that he—or at least the force of his principles—can come to dominate President Sadat, whom Qadhafi regards as an unworthy successor to Nasir.

To be sure, Qadhafi does seem to recognize the political realities around him. His speeches often reflect a clear understanding of the Arab people, their leaders, and the dynamics of the Middle East struggle. Nevertheless, his pursuit of his highly personal crusade frequently takes little account of political obstacles and risks.

The Revolution at Home

Since the overthrow of King Idris in 1969, Qadhafi and his colleagues on the ruling council have wielded near-dictatorial control. They suppressed all opposition from old regime sympathizers and dissident tribal groups and established a vigorous security apparatus that monitors the activities of opponents, both real and imagined. They have forced most of the council's antagonists into exile and have intimidated many of those remaining into judicious silence.

The regime has shown little willingness to permit partisan politics or public participation to interfere with its policies, and the country's sole political party, the Libyan Arab Socialist Union, is little more than a civil arm of the council. The council is careful to maintain its direct ties with the military, which is still vital to its security. Although the military does not intervene directly in affairs of state, some key officers—particularly those who participated in the 1969 coup—still have some sway with their fellow officers on the council.

During their years as conspirators, Qadhafi and the other officers on the council developed a deep veneration for Egypt's President Nasir, and at least at the beginning they devoted most of their energies to carrying out his scheme for a socialist Arab state. Using all the tools available to an authoritarian regime, Qadhafi and his colleagues have worked tirelessly to implement their own brand of Nasir's socialism—a rather vague formula for a classless society grounded in Islamic principles. To this end, they eliminated much of the corruption and patronage rampant under King Idris and removed the old regime's tribal administration. They Arabized the schools, social institutions, and many private concerns and established a legal code based almost exclusively on strict Islamic law. The regime's major effort, however, has been to restructure Libya's political and economic institutions as a first step toward merger with other Arab countries. The full panoply of Nasir's state—except for a "People's Assembly"—has been reproduced in Libya.

They were helped in this by Egypt's endorsement and the very tangible support Egypt has given in the way of security forces and advisers. Egyptian garrisons have been stationed in Libya since 1969 to guarantee the regime's control over the country. The Egyptian help is not gratuitous since Cairo is anxious to gain Libya's generous financial contributions and to maintain some political leverage over its wealthy neighbor. Although President Qadhafi's meddling in Arab politics has frequently irritated the Egyptians, the

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Libyan leader's affinity and financial support for Egypt have given them ample reason to support his regime.

All of this has not been of much help to the regime in its efforts to imbue the Libyan public with the proper revolutionary fervor. Although some young people have been enthusiastic enough to join the Libyan Arab Socialist Union, the party has made little headway in mobilizing important groups such as civil servants and professionals. For the bulk of the Libyan people, the "revolution" their leaders talk about remains remote from the tribal ties that have shaped their lives for centuries.

Qadhafi's Primacy

Most Libyans, despite their lack of attachment to the "revolution," do share their leader's view of the world and many admire Qadhafi. Although his activism sets him apart from most of his countrymen, Qadhafi's background, along with his unswerving commitment to Islam and Arab destiny, put him in tune with Libyan society. Like most Libyans, Qadhafi is a Bedouin from a small desert village. His single-mindedness is reinforced by his narrow experience outside the Arab world—brief stays in the UK and Greece in the 1960s are the only times he has been outside the Arab world. Most Libyans believe he is devout, puritanical, honest, and trying his best.

Like other visionary leaders, he has inspired many young people. He has also gained at least grudging respect from many members of the older, more cautious generation. His efforts to construct in Libya a state that is modern, socialist, and above all militarily strong appeals to many Libyans who bitterly remember the Arab defeat at the hands of the Israelis in 1967. Qadhafi's Arabization programs such as his insistence on Arabic language passports, his expulsion of the Italians, and his removal of British and US military bases, have struck a responsive chord in most Libyans, who after centuries of colonial domination deeply distrust almost all foreigners. His efforts to undercut both Soviet and Western influences in the Arab world, his achievements in gaining the advantage over Western oil companies, and his support for the Palestinians have been extremely popular.

The other members of the council recognize Qadhafi's personal primacy, and they undoubtedly realize that he could survive politically without them. They too are followers. They share their generation's sense of Arab humiliation and are frequently captivated by the idealism which Qadhafi dramatizes. While few if any of Qadhafi's colleagues share his sense of religious and patriotic mission, they appear to be dedicated to him personally and to most of his goals. Alliances do shift among the 11 men depending on the issue, and Qadhafi has not always been able to dictate to them. There has, however, been no real challenge to Qadhafi's leadership.

The Campaign Against Israel

Qadhafi's all but unchallenged position at home has allowed him to pursue his global campaign to advance the interests of Islam and to counter Israel and its supporters. The muscle behind his campaign is Libya's massive oil revenues, which run over $1.5 billion annually, 90 percent of it from US oil companies. He has reserves of about $3 billion.

Qadhafi clearly sees the Egyptian armed forces as the major hope for the ultimate defeat of Israel, and he has directed the lion's share of Libyan aid to Cairo. Following the 1967 war, Tripoli agreed to give Egypt a $59-million grant yearly to subsidize Cairo's military expenditures. In addition to this annual payment, Qadhafi extended an estimated $200 million in annual grants in 1970 and 1971. These cash supplements began to dwindle in 1972 as a result of Qadhafi's suspicion that Egypt was using Libyan assistance for other than strictly military purposes. Libya continues to give the $59-million annual cash grant and has redirected its supplemental aid to the direct purchase of arms and supplies for the Egyptian military. The recent move of some 30 Libyan Mirages to Egypt underscores Qadhafi's commitment to do all that he can to support Egypt's military effort.

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Qadhafi regards the fedayeen as one of the main anti-Israeli instrumentalities at hand. He has given at least $50 million in arms and supplies to the fedayeen—including Fatah's Black September Organization—over the past two years and is now their main supporter. He provides training facilities in Libya for perhaps as many as 2,000 guerrillas, gives logistic and cash support to various fedayeen operations, and provides asylum and documentation. The Libyan leader has frequently stated that terrorism should be aimed directly at Israel. He seems to recognize that some Black September atrocities have hurt more than helped the Palestinian cause. It has not been established
25X1 that Qadhafi was directly involved in the Khar-
25X1 toum murders [redacted] While there has been no clear sign that Qadhafi has inspired the fedayeen's choice of American targets, he is eager to support any action that promises to hurt Tel Aviv. His impatience with the Arab inability or reluctance to meet Israeli challenges is mounting, and he may favor terrorist operations outside the main battle area.

Israel's setbacks in black Africa have in considerable part grown out of Qadhafi's activism and the allure of his ability to provide generous financial benefits. In the past year Tel Aviv has lost its diplomatic standing in five African countries: Uganda, Chad, Congo, Niger, and Mali. Qadhafi encouraged Ugandan President Amin, a Muslim, to break with Israel by promising him aid and other support. Although no large financial package has materialized, Libya did send materiel and troops during an exile invasion last fall and has continued to provide limited military assistance and other forms of support. There is a Fatah office in Kampala.

Chad, which has a large Muslim population, broke with Israel last November. Christian President Tombalbaye probably hoped that the move would induce Qadhafi to deliver development funds and to stop supporting the Muslim insurgency in Chad. There has been talk of opening fedayeen offices in Chad and in Congo which, along with Niger, broke with the Israelis in December. Niger had been receiving modest Libyan aid even before its break with Israel and was anxious to avoid difficulties with Qadhafi. Mali—next door to Niger—followed suit in January. Mauritania, another of Qadhafi's clients, has always aligned itself with the Arabs.

Qadhafi has recently turned his attention to Latin America in hopes that he can promote a more pro-Arab outlook from that continent. Libya established diplomatic relations with Panama in March and plans to open embassies in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina. [redacted] 25X1

Enemy Number Two: The US

As Qadhafi has discovered his inability to strike at Israel directly, he has become more antagonistic toward the US which he sees as a hostile force totally aligned with Israel. The cuts in US diplomatic personnel in Tripoli last year and the expulsion of key embassy officials this year, continued propaganda assaults on US policy throughout the world, and, dramatically, the Libyan attack on a US reconnaissance flight in March are symptomatic of Tripoli's anti-US tendencies.

For some time, Qadhafi has tried to promote concerted Arab pressure on US economic interests as a way of changing Washington's policy in the Middle East, but other Arab oil producers have been reluctant to go along with him. Qadhafi has threatened to take unilateral action, such as cutting off oil exports to the West.

Like other Arab oil producers, Qadhafi knows he is vulnerable to a cut-off of oil revenues. He sees the knife cuts both ways. He recognizes that his oil income of over $1 billion a year gives him weight in Arab politics and, in particular, influence with Egypt. Qadhafi realizes that the proposed Libyan-Egyptian union would lose its attraction for Cairo should Libyan money disappear. He believes that other Arab oil producers would benefit from Libya's sacrifice by supplying

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Libya's Western consumers. Until he decides that his Arab neighbors are serious about cutting off oil supplies all around, Qadhafi is not likely to follow up his threats. In the meantime, Libya will continue to harass US oil companies and diplomats.

Another Enemy: The USSR

Qadhafi's antagonism toward the US is matched by an equally hostile attitude toward Communist regimes, which he views as dangerous atheistic forces. His suspicions of Soviet ambitions in the Middle East are amplified by his conviction that the superpowers may make a deal to divide up the world at the expense of the smaller, nonaligned nations.

Successful Soviet forays in the Middle East have been roundly condemned by Qadhafi. He criticized Egypt's reliance on the USSR and probably encouraged, by word and pocketbook, Cairo's break with Moscow. He denounced Iraq's conclusion of a friendship treaty with the Soviets, and Libyan media regularly attack Communist parties throughout the Arab world. Frequent broadsides are leveled against the Communist states, particularly those, like the USSR, with significant Muslim minorities.

Qadhafi has not allowed relations with Moscow to deteriorate to the point of jeopardizing Libyan purchases of Soviet military equipment, but despite Moscow's efforts he has permitted only a handful of Soviet technicians into the country. The Soviet diplomatic community is subject to harassment second only to that directed against the US.

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Troubled Merger

In general, the Revolutionary Command Council, the military, and the majority of the Libyan people have backed Qadhafi's international adventurism—some enthusiastically, others blindly. Qadhafi's eagerness to press ahead with the proposed Libyan-Egyptian merger, however, is widely resented by the Libyan people and is causing him problems at home. Relations with Egypt—particularly the generous financial sub-

Sadat and Qadhafi

sidies—have caused discord within the collective leadership. Some council members have strong reservations about formal ties with Egypt, and all of them are worried about their status in a joint Libyan-Egyptian power structure. Until recently the council has backed Qadhafi, at least in public. The council counts on Egyptian foot-dragging to undermine the proposed union.

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[redacted]

Most Libyans feel they have little to gain from the merger except Egypt's enormous debts and abiding poverty. The ordinary Libyan fears that he will be swallowed up by the Egyptians and is alarmed at the prospect of a massive immigration from Egypt. There are already at least 150,000 Egyptians in Libya, and merger would bring many more. The union issue has exacerbated the traditional animosity between the two peoples, and there are frequent reports of violent clashes between Libyans and members of the

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Egyptian community—particularly in Cyrenaica, the easternmost province where anti-Egyptian feelings are strongest.

Educated Libyans are more concerned with national unity and Libya's particular interests than with Qadhafi's union scheme. Although many desire to align their country closely with Arab causes, they want Libya to assume an influential position in the Arab world as an independent state. Aware of the development potential that results from oil resources, they fear that Qadhafi will squander the national treasure on the Egyptians.

Egypt's inept handling of the Israeli downing of a Libyan airliner in March brought anti-Egyptian feeling and popular opposition to the union in Libya into sharp focus. Many Libyans blamed the Egyptians for the tragedy, and during the funeral for airliner victims, angry crowds went on a rampage, destroying Egyptian property and cracking Egyptian heads. Qadhafi was badly shaken by the riots—the only public disorders since he seized power. His response was a call for a "new revolution," which seems to be an all-out effort to silence—if not eliminate—critics of the union and other malcontents—particularly members of Libya's small middle class. Some professionals, educators, and members of the bureaucracy have been arrested; some because they were suspected of ignoring Qadhafi's directives and others because they were suspected of being pro-American or pro-Communist.

What's Ahead

Oil has won Qadhafi a major role in Arab affairs, and he is convinced he knows what to do with his power. His faith in his course for Libya is fueled by what he sees as a record of many successes and few reverses. Despite the turmoil over merger with Egypt, Qadhafi seems confident that he can carry through with the union that he believes will ultimately give him more leverage in the campaign against Israel. Opposition to the merger in both Libya and Egypt is a serious obstacle, but chances that some type of union will be announced in September are still good if there are no drastic changes in the leadership of the two countries.

Despite his strong hand, the Libyan leader faces serious problems in the foreseeable future. His image has suffered and will continue to do so as he forces the union on his resisting countrymen. This could lead to a situation in which budding oppositionists gain confidence that an alternative to him is possible. Although a civilian-led ouster is unlikely, the regime may have to deal with more violence, plotting, and intrigue.

Moreover, as Qadhafi isolates himself from the rest of Libya, he will become more dependent on the council and the armed forces, which have so far proved loyal. Union will severely test this commitment.

Perhaps the most dangerous factor working against Qadhafi is his own emotional and uncompromising outlook. His heavy-handed demands on Libya's clients and other countries may engender resentment and ultimately work against his cause. Tripoli's relentless challenges to Tel Aviv have made Libya a logical target for Israeli reprisals. Moreover, Qadhafi's antagonism toward the US has begun to isolate Libya from an important source of technical assistance. Finally, Qadhafi's contempt for all but his own brand of Islamic nationalism, his reluctance to listen to the warnings of his colleagues, and his willingness to ride roughshod over the more immediate concerns of his people could be his undoing. If union with Egypt becomes a reality, many of these vulnerabilities are likely to be amplified as Qadhafi's uncompromising position is pitched against the realities of Egyptian power and a wary Egyptian leadership.

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